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**HEADLINE:** HEALTH CARE A 'RIGHT,' MAYOR SAYS; CITIZENS GROUP SEEKS SOLUTIONS

**BYLINE:** By Lisa M. Sodders Staff Writer

**BODY:**

Asserting that access to quality health care ``is a right, not a privilege," more than 500 Los Angeles-area citizens met Saturday to discuss how to fix America's health care crisis.

Organized by the Citizens' Health Care Working Group mandated by Congress, the Los Angeles Health Care Community Meeting was the eighth of 38 meetings planned across the country to compile recommendations for the president and Congress.

``There is no magic bullet, there is no one answer that is going to address all the cost and quality issues, but we think it's at least a beginning," said Randall Johnson, the group's chairman.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who drew a standing ovation from the participants, told the group that the political party that offers the best solution to the country's health care crisis will take the presidency in 2008.

The fact that so many working Americans are without health care ``is an American tragedy, an absolute travesty," Villaraigosa said.

``Part of the American dream is the idea that health care is a right, not a privilege," Villaraigosa said. ``Every American should be able to afford health care."

Forty-six million Americans, most of them working adults with incomes above the poverty line, are without health insurance. Health insurance spending - \$1.8 trillion in 2004 - continues to rise.

Quality is another issue. Despite technological and other medical advances, Americans only get 55 percent of the recommended care for common health conditions, the Working Group says. Every year, an estimated 44,000 to 98,000 people die because of medical errors.

Saturday's meeting drew participants from all over Los Angeles. They discussed health care benefits and services, access to health care, financing, and tradeoffs.

Top conclusions included the principle that health care was a right; health care should be affordable, good quality and not profit-driven; everyone should have access; prevention and education should be stressed; and accountability should be expressed in dollars.

Mamie Jackson, president and CEO of the Studio City-based National Organization for Renal Disease, said she believes the United States should offer some kind of basic health care to everyone, with an emphasis on prevention.

``It doesn't have to be free, but it has to be affordable," she said.

Michael A. Straeter, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 1442, based in El Segundo, said the meeting was a good start, but said, ``my biggest fear is that Congress is just going to put (the final report) on a shelf somewhere."

``There's an inherent resistance in our society by corporate interests in resisting any political effort to provide single-payer universal health care," Straeter said.

But George Grob, the Working Group's executive director, said the meetings were mandated by a 2003 law. The president is required to issue a report based on the CHCWG's findings, and five congressional committees will hold hearings on it.

Organizers stressed that the discussion is far from finished. Interested individuals or groups can download their own discussion materials from the Web site at [www.citizenshealthcare.gov](http://www.citizenshealthcare.gov) and make their opinions known.

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